RAYMOND E. FEIST
THE WOOD BOY
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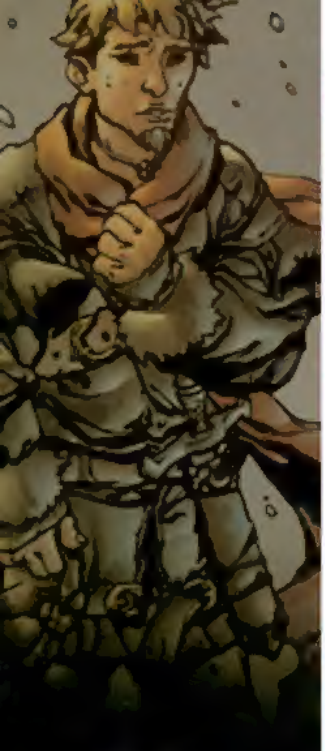

IMAGE COMICS PRESENTS

THE WOOD BOY™

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YOUR GRACE...
IF YOU HAVE A MOMENT...
...COULD YOU COME OUTSIDE?

WHO ARE YOU, BOY?
I AM THE WOOD BOY.
WHAT DID YOU SAY?

SIR, MY NAME IS DIRK.
I AM THE SERVANT OF LORD PAUL OF WHITE HILL.
IT'S THE ESTATE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE KAKISAW VALLEY.
THREE DAYS' WALK FROM HERE.
I CARRY FIREWOOD.
I'VE VISITED LORD PAUL MANY TIMES OVER THE YEARS.
THAT'S THIRTY-FIVE MILES FROM HERE, AND TWENTY BEHIND ENEMY LINES.
WHAT'S THIS?
IT IS MY MASTER'S TREASURE.
SHE IS HIS DAUGHTER.
THE MAN IS A MURDERER.
HE WAS ONCE MY FRIEND.
YOU'D BETTER COME INSIDE AND TELL ME YOUR STORY.
MY MEN WILL TAKE CARE OF YOUR SLED.
I'LL HAVE THEM GET YOU SOME TEA AND SOMETHING TO EAT.
YOU LOOK LIKE YOU COULD USE SOME REST.
SO WHY DON'T YOU SIT DOWN AND START AT THE BEGINNING, DIRK?
OF COURSE, SIR.
THANK YOU.

I AM...WELL, WAS THE YOUNGEST SERVANT OF THE WHITE HILL, M'LORD.
MY FATHER WAS A STONECUTTER FROM THE TOWN OF WALINOR WHO ALREADY HAD HIS HANDS FULL APPRENTICING MY TWO OLDER BROTHERS.
HE HAD CUT THE STONE FOR LORD PAUL'S HOME, AND USED THAT CONNECTION TO HELP GAIN ME A POSITION IN THE HOUSEHOLD.
IT WAS A GOOD JOB, AND I KNEW I HAD A FUTURE AHEAD OF ME GUARANTEED WITH SOME SORT OF RANK ON THE ESTATE.
I EVEN DREAMED ABOUT MEETING A GIRL AND MARRYING SO I COULD RAISE SOME SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF MY OWN.
WE ALL HEARD ABOUT THE INVADERS, AND THE WAR, OF COURSE, BUT IT ALL SEEMED SO FAR AWAY.
BUT THEN, IN THE SPRING, WE SAW THEM APPROACHING THE WHITE HILL--
--THE TSURANI, MOVING IN A CALM COLUMN THAT TOLD US IMMEDIATELY THAT ANY ATTEMPT AT RESISTANCE WOULD BE CRUSHED.
LORD PAUL ORDERED US ALL OUTSIDE TO STAND WITH HIM AS HE SURRENDERED.
THE ARMY'S COMMANDER BEGAN SHOUTING OUT ORDERS IN HIS LANGUAGE, AND A BLACK-ROBED MAN--HIS INTERPRETER--TOLD US THAT WHITE HILL AND THE SURROUNDING COUNTRYSIDE WERE NOW UNDER TSURANI RULE.
HIS NAME WAS CHAPKA, AND HIS RANK WAS EITHER "HIT LEADER" OR "STRIKE LEADER."
IT HAPPENED SO QUICKLY, I WASN'T QUITE SURE.
ONLY THE NOBLE OF THIS HOUSE MAY BEAR ARMS, AND HIS PERSONAL MAN.
ALL OTHERS PUT WEAPONS HERE.

ANY OTHER WEAPONS?

THIS MAN DISOBEYED.
HE HID A WEAPON.
HE WILL BE PUNISHED.
WHAT SHALL YOU DO WITH HIM?
THE SWORD IS TOO HONORABLE A DEATH FOR A DISOBEDIENT SLAVE.
HE WILL BE HANGED.
IT WAS JUST A SMALL ONE..
I FORGOT I HAD IT!
I HARDLY KNEW THE MAN, BUT I REMEMBER HIS NAME WAS "JACKSON."
THEY DIDN'T EVEN WAIT FOR HIM TO REGAIN CONSCIOUSNESS.
ANY SLAVE WITH A WEAPON~ WE HANG.
I'D SEEN DEAD MEN BEFORE, SIR, BUT THIS HANGING MADE MY STOMACH TWIST.
PARTIALLY FROM SEEING JACKSON DIE SO QUICKLY, AND PARTIALLY FROM FEAR FOR MY OWN SAFETY.

THE SOLDIERS LOOTED THE HOUSE WITH AN ODD SORT OF EFFICIENCY, BRINGING COMMON HOUSEHOLD ITEMS BEFORE LORD PAUL AND ASKING HIM WHAT THEY WERE FOR.
THEY SORTED THEM INTO TWO PILES, THOUGH I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT THE PILES THEMSELVES WERE FOR.
AND THIS?
AN IRON SKILLET.
USED FOR COOKING FOOD ON A HOT STOVE.
LOOK AT THAT.
WHAT IS IT?
THEY'RE QUEER FOR METAL.
LOOK AT THEIR ARMOR AND THEIR WEAPONS.
IT TOOK A MOMENT FOR OLD WILLIAM'S WORDS TO SINK IN.
I'D NEVER SEEN THE TSURANI BEFORE, AND EVERYTHING ABOUT THEM WAS STRANGE.
BUT AFTER A MOMENT, I SAW WHAT HE MEANT.
THEIR ARMOR AND WEAPONS WEREN'T METAL LIKE OURS~
~THEY SEEMED TO BE MADE OF HIDE OR WOOD, CLEVERLY FASHIONED AND LACQUERED.
BUT THERE WERE NO BUCKLES, BLADES, FASTENERS, OR ANY SORT OF METAL ON ANY OF IT.
WHAT'S IT MEAN?
I DON'T KNOW, BUT I'M SURE WE'LL FIND OUT.

THEY SPENT THE WHOLE DAY ITEMIZING THE HOUSEHOLD LIKE THAT, STRIPPING IT OF ANY SORT OF METAL THEY COULD FIND.
WHEN SUNDOWN ARRIVED, THEY ORDERED ALL OF US TO GATHER OUR BELONGINGS AND MOVE INTO THE BARN OR KITCHEN.
THEY TOOK OVER THE SERVANTS' QUARTERS.
I WAS SURPRISED TO SEE THAT THE OFFICER, TOO, STAYED IN THE SERVANT'S QUARTERS AND NOT IN THE HOUSE WITH LORD PAUL AND HIS DAUGHTER.
IT WAS THE FIRST OF MANY THINGS THAT WOULD PUZZLE ME DURING THE YEAR.

OVER THE NEXT TWO MONTHS, THE TSURANI SHOWED THEMSELVES TO BE STRICT BUT FAIR IN MOST CIRCUMSTANCES.
BUT WE LEARNED QUICKLY NOT TO CROSS THEM.
DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE SOLDIERS DID NOT SPEAK OUR LANGUAGE, THEY WERE QUITE EFFECTIVE AT MAKING THEMSELVES UNDERSTOOD.
SAMUEL WAS A GOOD EXAMPLE.
SAMUEL WAS AN OLD FARMER WHO HAD A LITTLE TOO MUCH TO DRINK ONE NIGHT.
A PATROL STOPPED BY, AND ONE OF THE TSURANI ORDERED HIM INTO HIS HOME.

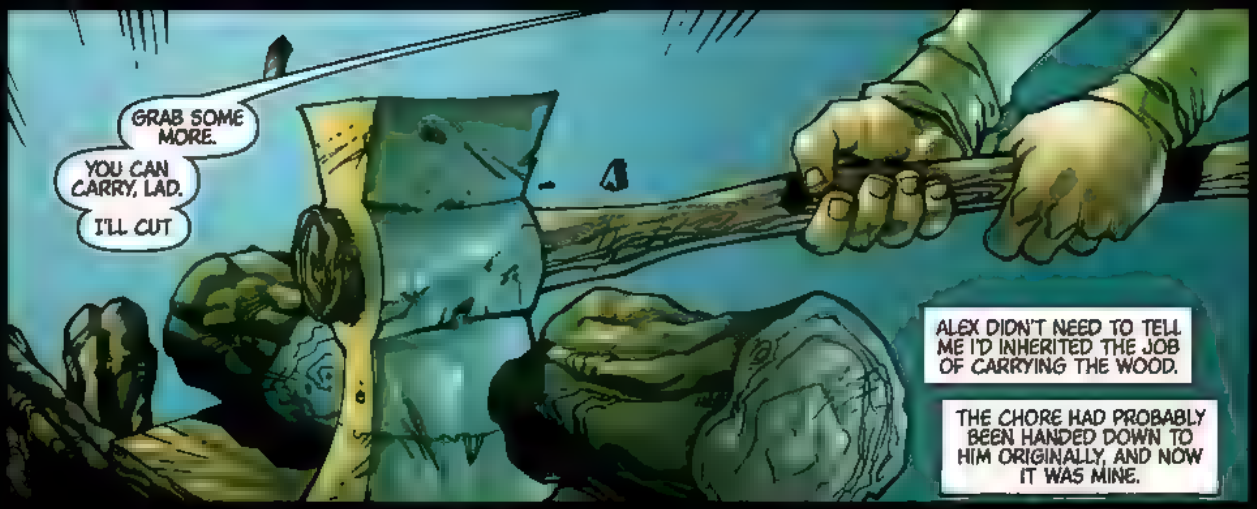
HIS RESPONSE WASN'T QUITE TO THEIR LIKING.
THAT WAS HOW LIFE WORKED WITH THE TSURANI.

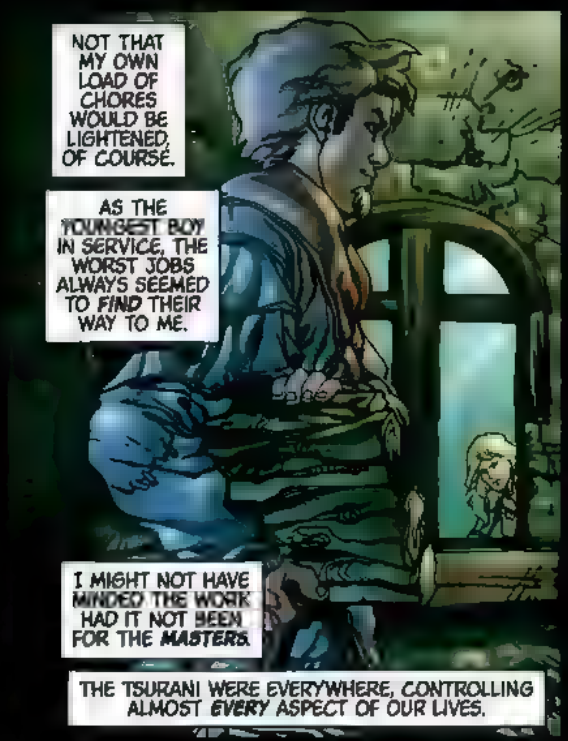
THEY BEAT HIM SENSELESS IN FRONT OF HIS HOME, WHILE HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN STOOD BY, AND THEN STRUNG UP A ROPE AND HANGED HIM.
IF YOU MADE TROUBLE, THEY WOULD CORRECT YOUR BEHAVIOR... OFTEN PERMANENTLY.
IT WAS BECAUSE OF A TROUBLEMAKER, IN FACT, THAT I BECAME KNOWN AS "THE WOOD BOY."

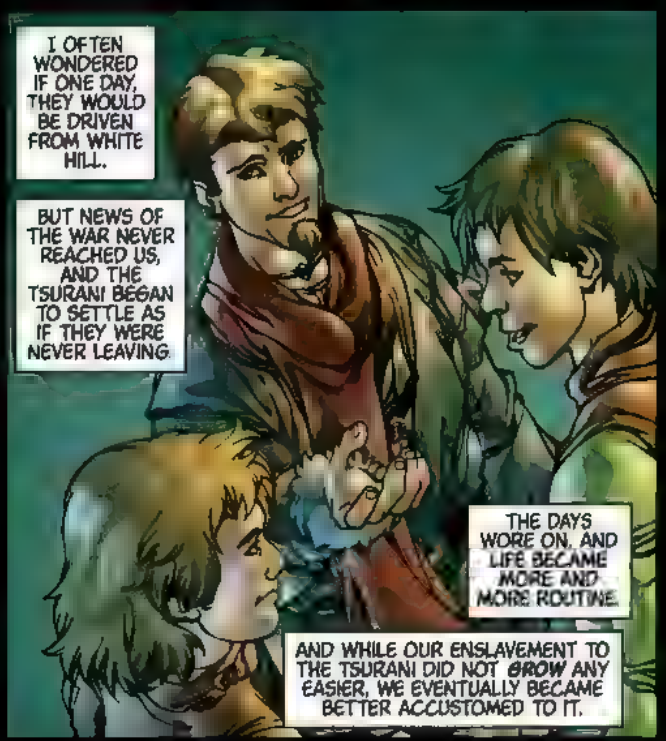
DON'T GET UP!
STAY DOWN, LAD!
DON'T GIVE HIM AN EXCUSE TO STRING YOU UP!
WHAT HAPPENED?
I DON'T KNOW...
I JUST LOOKED AT THE MAN.

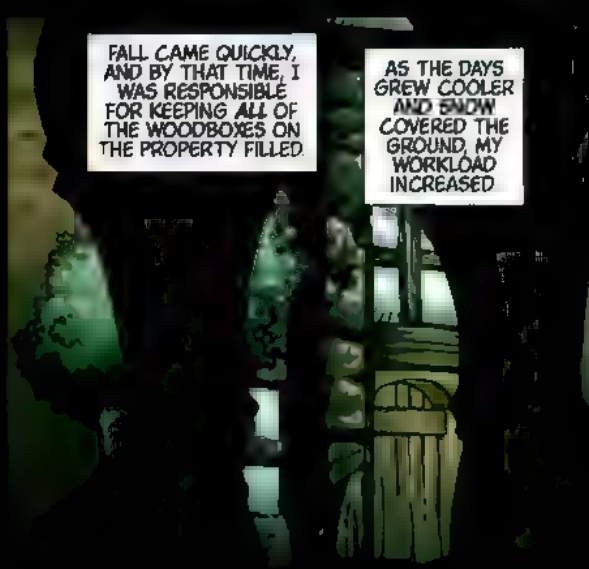
IT'S HOW YOU LOOKED AT HIM.
YOU SMIRKED.
IF YOU'D LOOKED AT ME THAT WAY, I'D HAVE DONE THE SAME.
I HAD MY FILL OF SMIRKING BOYS IN THE ARMY AND KNOCKED DOWN A FEW IN MY TIME BEFORE I RETIRED
SHOW THESE MURDERERS SOME RESPECT, LAD, OR THEY'LL HANG YOU JUST BECAUSE THEY CAN.
EVEN JUST IF IT'S BECAUSE IT'S A SLOW DAY IN NEED OF SOME AMUSEMENT
I WON'T DO THAT AGAIN, YOU CAN BET.
SEE THAT YOU DON'T. DROGEN.
YES, SIR?
PASS THE WORD THAT THE BASTARDS SEEM TOUCHIER THAN USUAL.
MUST HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE WAR.
JUST MAKE SURE THE LADS KNOW TO KEEP POLITE AND DO WHATEVER THEY'RE TOLD.
SIR!
GET OFF WITH YOU, ALEX.
YOU'LL LIVE

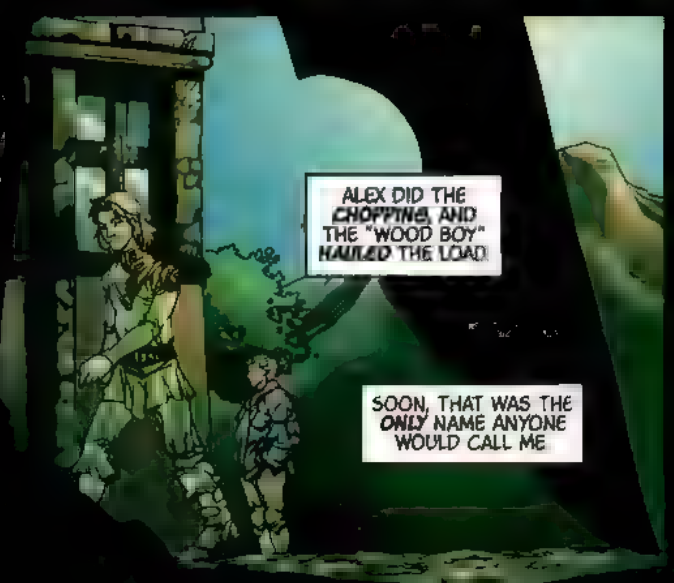
THEY DON'T SEEM TO TAKE KINDLY TO ANY SORT OF GREETING.
I THINK KEEPING YOUR EYES DOWN OR SOME SUCH IS WHAT THEY WANT.
I NEVER LOOKED UP AT THE TSURANI, BUT FOR A DIFFERENT REASON.
THEY TERRIFIED ME.
KEEPING MY EYES DOWN SEEMED LIKE THE NATURAL CHOICE.
I CAN MANAGE.
CAN YOU TAKE THE WOOD?
SURE.
IT ONLY TOOK ME A FEW SECONDS TO REALIZE I'D JUST AGREED TO CARRY WOOD TO THE TSURANI QUARTERS.
AND BY THAT TIME, ALEX WAS ALREADY GONE.
SINCE IT WAS STILL SUMMER, WOOD WAS ONLY NEEDED FOR THE KITCHEN, REALLY.
BUT THE TSURANI LIKED TO BUILD FIRES WHERE THEY COULD COOK THEIR OWN UNUSUAL FOOD.
THAT MEANT WOOD WAS NEEDED EVERY DAY, AND THE JOB OF TAKING IT TO THEM WAS HARDLY A POPULAR ONE.
I'LL NEVER FORGET THE FIRST TIME I DROPPED THE WOOD OFF IN THEIR QUARTERS.
A FEW OF THE SOLDIERS IN THE ROOM SAT UP, NEARLY AT ATTENTION, AND SIMPLY WATCHED.
SILENTLY.
EERILY
THE WOODBOX WAS IN THE BACK, AND SO I STRODE QUICKLY THROUGH THE ROOM, EYES DOWN, AFRAID EVEN TO EXHALE AS I WALKED PAST THEM.
A FEW WEEKS BEFORE, THIS HAD BEEN MY HOME.
I TRIED NOT TO LOOK UP AT THE BED IN THE FARTHEST CORNER, WHERE I HAD SPENT SO MANY NIGHTS DREAMING OF THE LIFE BEFORE ME.
A LIFE, I HOPED, I COULD STILL HAVE DESPITE THE PRESENCE OF THE TSURANI


GRAB SOME MORE.
YOU CAN CARRY, LAD.
I'LL CUT
ALEX DIDN'T NEED TO TELL ME I'D INHERITED THE JOB OF CARRYING THE WOOD.
THE CHORE HAD PROBABLY BEEN HANDED DOWN TO HIM ORIGINALLY, AND NOW IT WAS MINE.


NOT THAT MY OWN LOAD OF CHORES WOULD BE LIGHTENED, OF COURSE.
AS THE YOUNGEST BOY IN SERVICE, THE WORST JOBS ALWAYS SEEMED TO *FIND* THEIR WAY TO ME.
I MIGHT NOT HAVE MINDED THE WORK HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR THE ***MASTERS***.
THE TSURANI WERE EVERYWHERE, CONTROLLING ALMOST ***EVERY*** ASPECT OF OUR LIVES.


I OFTEN WONDERED IF ONE DAY, THEY WOULD BE DRIVEN FROM WHITE HILL.
BUT NEWS OF THE WAR NEVER REACHED US, AND THE TSURANI BEGAN TO SETTLE AS IF THEY WERE NEVER LEAVING.
THE DAYS WORE ON, AND LIFE BECAME MORE AND MORE ROUTINE.
AND WHILE OUR ENSLAVEMENT TO THE TSURANI DID NOT ***GROW*** ANY EASIER, WE EVENTUALLY BECAME BETTER ACCUSTOMED TO IT.

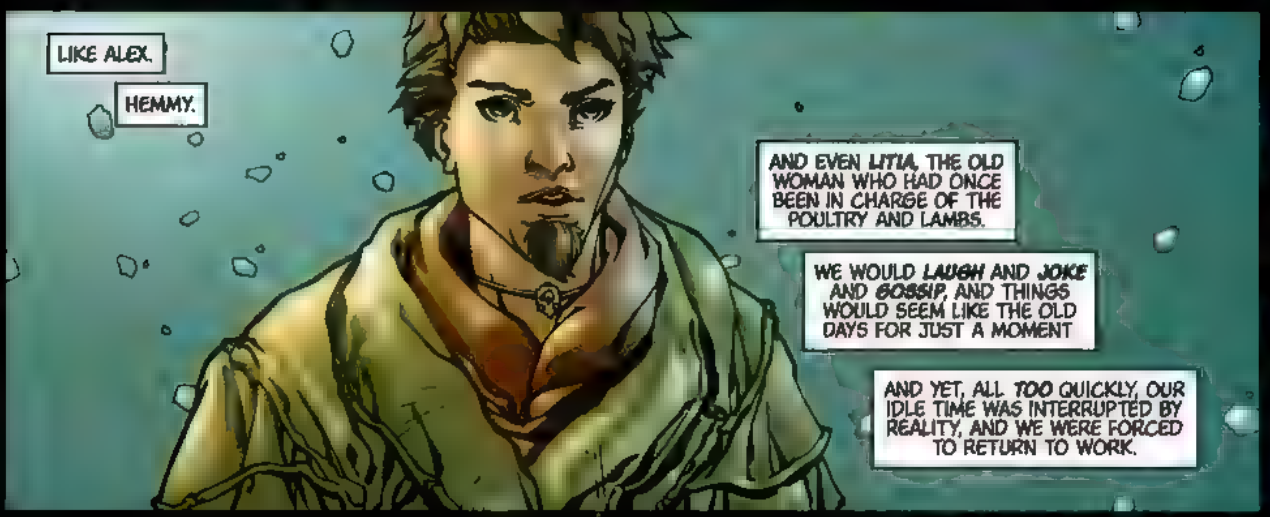

FALL CAME QUICKLY, AND BY THAT TIME, I WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR KEEPING ***ALL*** OF THE WOODBOXES ON THE PROPERTY FILLED.
AS THE DAYS GREW COOLER AND SNOW COVERED THE GROUND, MY WORKLOAD INCREASED


ALEX DID THE ***CHOPPING***, AND THE "WOOD BOY" ***HAULED*** THE LOAD.
SOON, THAT WAS THE ***ONLY*** NAME ANYONE WOULD CALL ME

I HAD NEVER REALLY BEEN DEPRESSED BEFORE.
BUT WITH THE TSURANI AROUND, IT WAS HARD *NOT* TO BE.
UNDER LORD PAUL, I WOULD HAVE BEEN PAID FOR MY WORK.
BUT UNDER THE TSURANI, I WORKED TO STAY *ALIVE*.
A *FEW* THINGS KEPT ME GOING.

THE FIRST WAS A GIRL.
THERE WERE NO SERVING GIRLS EVEN *CLOSE* TO MY AGE ON THE FARM.
BUT THERE WAS *ANIKA*, LORD PAUL'S DAUGHTER.
OFTEN, AS I WOULD CARRY WOOD PAST THE HOUSE, I WOULD SEE *HER* LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW.
AND HER SMILE, I'LL *NEVER* FORGET IT.

THE *NEXT* WAS THE FREE TIME.
I WORKED *HARD* ON WHITE HILL.
BUT EVERY NOW AND THEN, I WAS ABLE TO STEAL A FEW MOMENTS AWAY WITH SOME OF THE OTHERS.


LIKE ALEX.
HEMMY.
AND EVEN *LITIA*, THE OLD WOMAN WHO HAD ONCE BEEN IN CHARGE OF THE POULTRY AND LAMBS.
WE WOULD *LAUGH* AND *JOKE* AND *GOSSIP*, AND THINGS WOULD SEEM LIKE THE OLD DAYS FOR JUST A MOMENT
AND YET, ALL *TOO* QUICKLY, OUR IDLE TIME WAS INTERRUPTED BY REALITY, AND WE WERE FORCED TO RETURN TO WORK.

THE THIRD WAS THE MIDWINTER'S DAY FESTIVAL.
TRADITIONALLY, THE FESTIVAL WAS A GRAND TIME WHEN MANY OF THOSE LIVING IN NEIGHBORING TOWNS AND ESTATES COMING IN FOR PARTIES.
A TOWNSMAN WOULD BE SELECTED TO PLAY THE PART OF OLD MAN WINTER, AND HE WOULD COME INTO TOWN PULLED BY A SLED OF DOGS DRESSED UP AS WOLVES AND GIVE SWEETS TO THE CHILDREN.
ADULTS WOULD EXCHANGE GIFTS AND TOKENS, AND THEN EVERYONE WOULD EAT TOO MUCH FOOD AND MANY WOULD DRINK TOO MUCH WINE AND ALE.
AND MANY YOUNG COUPLES WOULD BE MARRIED.

BUT WITH THE TSURANI OCCUPYING WHITE HILL THIS YEAR, WE HAD LITTLE OPPORTUNITY TO CELEBRATE.
THE DAY WAS COLD AND GRAY, MUCH LIKE OUR SPIRITS.
MIKIA AND TORREN HAD BEEN BETROTHED BEFORE THE TSURANI HAD ARRIVED, AND WERE PERMITTED TO MARRY.
OUR CAPTORS FORBADE ANY SORT OF TRAVEL, HOWEVER, AND BARELY PERMITTED LORD PAUL TO BRING IN A PRIEST FROM THE SHRINE OF DALA TO PERFORM THEIR MARRIAGE.
THE COUPLE, AT LEAST, WAS ABLE TO FIND SOME COMFORT AND HAPPINESS IN EACH OTHER.
THE REST OF US FOUND COMFORT IN THE FESTIVAL'S SUPPLY OF APPLEJACK.

IT WAS THE FIRST YEAR I WAS ALLOWED TO DRINK AS MUCH AS I CARED TO, AND I LEARNED MANY *VALUABLE* LESSONS THAT EVENING.
ONE WAS THAT MY STOMACH HAD ITS LIMITS, AND WOULD EVENTUALLY FIND A WAY OF INFORMING ME WHEN I'D HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK.
ANOTHER WAS THAT MY FRIENDS WOULD *NOT*.
THEY STOOD AROUND, AMUSED, WATCHING MY STOMACH TRYING TO EMPTY OUT DRINK THAT WAS NO LONGER THERE.
MY HEAD WAS SWIMMING.
SOMEHOW, I MANAGED TO FIND MY WAY BACK TO THE LOFT IN THE BARN WHERE I SLEPT.
AS THE YOUNGEST MEMBER OF THE HOUSEHOLD, I WAS FORCED TO SLEEP IN THE WORST SPOT, NEXT TO THE HAY DOOR, WHICH PROMISED A FRIGID, DRAFTY NIGHT'S SLEEP IN THE WINTER.
WITH THE OTHER MENS' WARMTH NEARBY, I WAS ABLE TO SURVIVE.

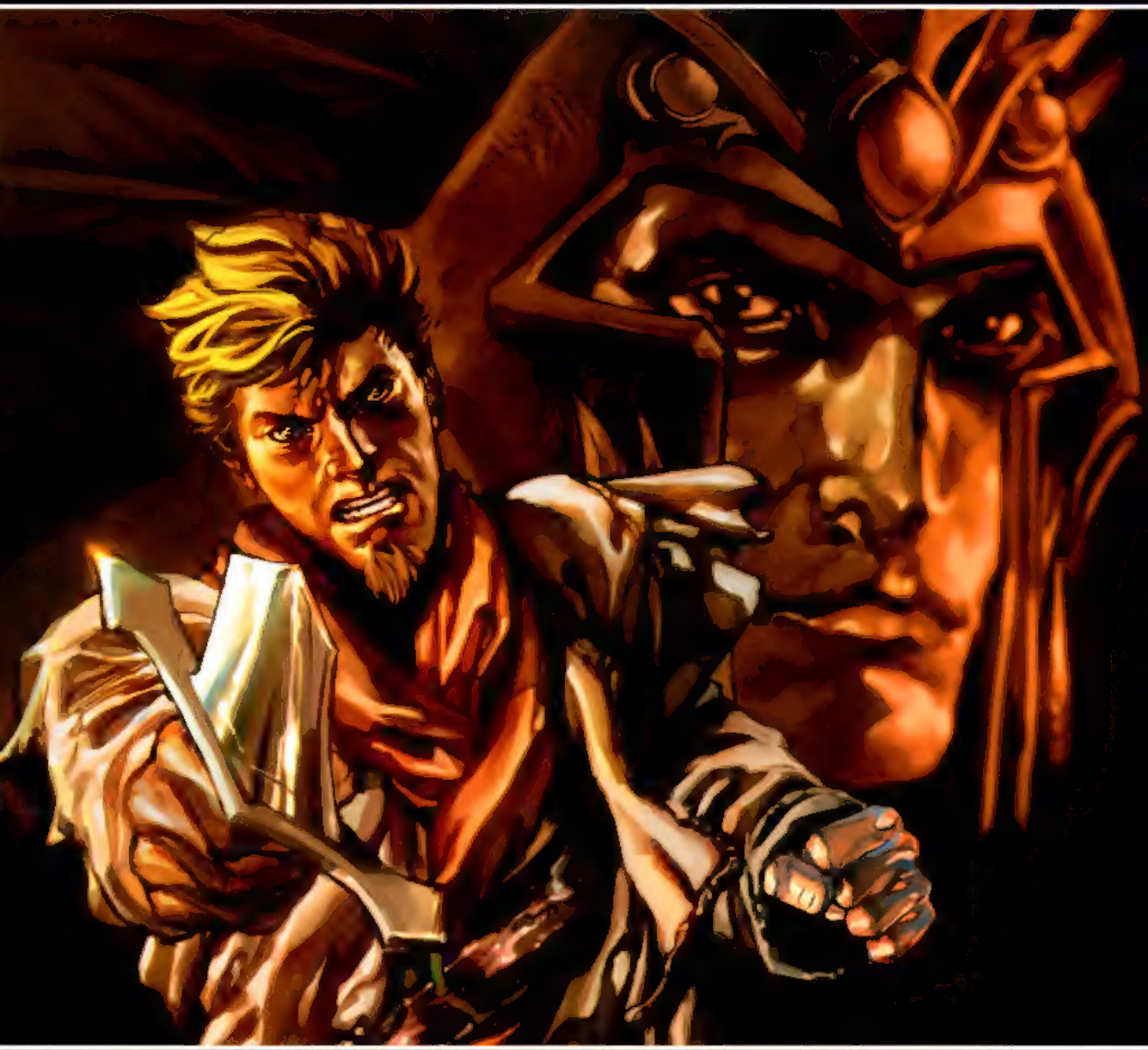
BUT IT WAS AN ESPECIALLY COLD NIGHT, AND I MIGHT HAVE FROZEN TO DEATH BY THE DOOR HAD MY SLEEP NOT BEEN SUDDENLY INTERRUPTED..
AARGH!
WHAT'S THAT?
IT SOUNDS LIKE HAMISH...
WHAT'S HE SAYING?
HE'S FIGHTING SOME OLD BATTLE, FOR SURE.
IF HAMISH WAKES UP THE TSURANI WITH ALL THAT SHOUTING, THEY'LL KILL HIM.
WE'VE GOT TO SHUT HIM UP.
YOU WANT TO GO AND TRY TO TALK TO HIM WHILE HE'S WAVING THAT SWORD AROUND?
YOU GO RIGHT AHEAD.
I'LL TAKE MY CHANCES UP HERE.
I'VE SEEN HIM DRUNK BEFORE... PUTS HIM IN A DANGEROUS TEMPER, IT DOES.
WE'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING.
LIKE WHAT?
I DON'T KNOW..
UH-OH...

YOU STINKIN' BASTARDS!
YOU COME ON AND I'LL SHOW YOU HOW TO USE A SWORD!
THEY'RE GOING TO GET SOME HELP.
MAYBE THEY'LL JUST MAKE HIM PUT UP HIS SWORD AND GO TO BED.
MAYBE
WHERE'D YOUR FRIEND GO?
TOO AFRAID TO FIGHT AN OLD MAN?
OH NO

COME AND SING TO ME, YOU SONS OF DOGS!
LOOK, THE OFFICER'S LEAVING.
MAYBE THEY'RE GOING TO LET HIM ALONE
GODS..

WHAT DO WE DO?
NOTHING.
UNTIL THE TSURANI TELL US TO GET OUT TOMORROW AND BURY HIM, WE DO NOTHING.
BUT IT'S NOT RIGHT.
NOTHING IS RIGHT THESE DAYS.
IT WAS, AS I SAID, AN ESPECIALLY COLD NIGHT.
BUT A COLDER WINTER AWAITED US, AND THE MURDER OF HAMISH WAS ONLY A SHADOW OF WHAT WAS YET TO COME...

NEXT ISSUE...



RAYMOND E. FEIST

THE WOOD BOY

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THE WOOD BOY

Dirk is a young teenager who wants nothing more than to learn a trade and settle down with a wife as he works on Lord Paul's estates. But once the invading Tsurani arrive and seize the estate and its servants, Dirk becomes little more than a slave, hauling wood for his alien captors and watching as those who try to stand up to the invaders are beaten and executed for their insolence. And yet, as Dirk becomes accustomed to his new life, he finds himself awake in a terrifying nightmare that will once again alter his future... and test the strength of his being.

#001

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